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WHO ARE THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES?

People everywhere, often without realizing it, have been influenced by the cultures and achievements of indigenous peoples—through the foods on our tables, the words in our languages and the medicines we use daily for everything from headaches to heart disease.

Many of the world's staple foods, such as peppers, potatoes, lentils, peas, sugar cane, garlic and tomatoes, were first cultivated by indigenous peoples. From the various indigenous languages of the Americas come familiar words like canoe, barbecue, squash, powwow and moccasin. An estimated 75 per cent of the world's plant-based pharmaceuticals, including aspirin, digitalis and quinine, have been derived from medicinal plants found in tribal areas. Indeed, the contribution of indigenous peoples to modern civilization is pervasive.

Indigenous peoples are descendants of the original inhabitants of many lands, strikingly varied in their cultures, religions and patterns of social and economic organization. At

least 5,000 indigenous groups can be distinguished by linguistic and cultural differences and by geographical separation. Some are hunters and gatherers, while others live in cities and participate fully in the culture of their national society. But all indigenous peoples retain a strong sense of their distinct cultures, the most salient feature of which is a special relationship to the land.

How many indigenous peoples are there, and where do they live?

The world's estimated 300 million indigenous people are spread across the world in more than 70 countries. Among them are the Indians of the Americas, the Inuit and Aleutians of the circumpolar region, the Saami of northern Europe, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia and the Maori of New Zealand. More than 60 per cent of Bolivia's population is indigenous, and indigenous peoples make up roughly half the populations of Guatemala and Peru. China and India together have more than 150 million indigenous and tribal people. About 10 million indigenous people live in Myanmar.

What are the living conditions of indigenous peoples?

Despite their diversity, they face similar problems. Under the march of colonialism, the spread of non-indigenous religions and the relentless pace of development and modernization, indigenous groups have seen their traditional cultures eroded and their landholdings confiscated or signed away as part of the economic coercion to which they were subjected. This legacy has helped to make indigenous peoples some of the most disadvantaged groups on Earth.

► Most of India's tribal people live below the poverty line.

► The life expectancy of indigenous people in northern Russia is 18 years less than the national average.

► Unemployment among Australia's Aborigines is five times the national average.

More generally, indigenous people who are integrated into a national society face discrimination and exploitation in housing, education and in matters having to do with language and religion. Those remaining in their traditional territories face disruption of their cultures and forced displacement as their lands and natural resources are claimed for national development. It is no exaggeration to say that some indigenous peoples live under the threat of extinction.

What is the status of indigenous peoples?

The growing awareness about human rights in the post-war era of the past 40 years or so has not been matched by parallel progress in enhancing the rights of indigenous groups.

However, a new activism by Indian, tribal and aboriginal groups in the last decade or so has produced signs that a different attitude is developing.

► In 1979, the Parliament of Denmark granted self-government to Greenland and jurisdiction over education, health care, social welfare and economic development.

► Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia and Mexico have adopted far-reaching laws on the rights of indigenous people.

► The Government of New Zealand and the National Maori Congress are engaged in a constructive dialogue that aims to resolve a number of disputes, including the issue of self-rule.

► In Canada, one million indigenous people, among them Mohawk, Cree and Inuit, have increased their visibility, attained a level of political power previously unimagined and used their newfound position to protect their lands and carve out new social and economic gains.

Still, despite these successes and their growing political and organiza-



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tional competence, indigenous peoples continue to lose their lands, resources and identities.

What are the concerns of indigenous peoples?

Among the issues that concern indigenous peoples are:

- ▶ land and resources
- ▶ human rights
- ▶ internal colonization
- ▶ self-government
- ▶ self-development
- ▶ environment
- ▶ discrimination
- ▶ health
- ▶ education
- ▶ language
- ▶ cultural survival
- ▶ intellectual property rights
- ▶ social and economic conditions

Indigenous peoples see themselves as the legitimate claimants to their territories and natural resources, and consider control over local economy, social planning, land use and taxation essential to their existence. Thus they are seeking greater degrees of autonomy and self-rule.

The lives of the 50 million indigenous people who inhabit the world's tropical rainforests are threatened by deforestation. But while indigenous people are on the front lines of *environmental degradation*, they also have a vital role to play in environmental protection. For centuries, they have engaged in *sustainable land management and land use* in the areas in which they live.

The annual market value of drugs derived from medicinal plants discovered, developed and passed from generation to generation by indigenous peoples exceeds \$43 billion. Drug companies tap into this indigenous knowledge but rarely share the profits with indigenous peoples. Thus indigenous peoples are attempting to gain greater protection for their *intellectual property*.

The high quality of indigenous artwork and cultural artifacts gener-

ates great demand for them, but theft and the unauthorized sale of indigenous items robs the creators of both money and their cultural patrimony. Thus indigenous peoples are looking to secure the right to their *cultural property*.

Indigenous peoples want to maintain their distinct cultures and transmit their cultural heritage to subsequent generations. Thus they are demanding the right to educate their children in their own *languages*, with their own textbooks and school material.

What are indigenous peoples doing to achieve their goals?

Indigenous peoples have been demanding justice from the international community for many years. They have organized locally, nationally and regionally and are active in the international diplomatic arena, seeking respect for their cultures and ways of life and full participation in the decisions that affect them.

Twelve indigenous peoples' organizations have consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). These are: Four Directions Council, Grand Council of the Crees (Quebec), Indian Council of South America, Indian Law Resource Center, Indigenous World Association, International Indian Treaty Council, International Organization of Indigenous Resources Development, Inuit Circumpolar Conference, National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Services Secretariat, National Indian Youth Council, Nordic Saami Council and World Council of Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous communities have also resorted to the legal system, in some cases winning recognition of their claims. The Passamaquaddy and Penobscot Indians of Maine were recently awarded \$80 million over a violation of the Non-Intercourse Act, which was passed in 1790 and provided that no one could buy or take land from Indians without offi-

cial United States approval. The tribes used part of the award to purchase 300,000 acres of timberland.

What is the United Nations doing for indigenous peoples?

The United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations is the centre of indigenous rights activities within the United Nations system. The Working Group:

- ▶ reviews Government policies covering the protection of the human rights of indigenous peoples;
- ▶ makes recommendations to the United Nations Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which promote action on issues related to indigenous peoples; and

▶ is drafting, as part of its mandate to develop international standards concerning the rights of indigenous peoples, a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which is expected to be completed in 1993.

Increasingly, indigenous organizations make use of the United Nations complaints procedures for human rights violations. For example, the "1503" procedure established by ECOSOC enables indigenous organizations to voice their concerns before the United Nations and to appeal for redress.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) was the first international body to take steps to promote the rights of indigenous groups. ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples affirms that no State or social group has the right to deny the identity to which an indigenous people may lay claim, and places responsibility on States for ensuring, with the participation of indigenous peoples, their rights and integrity. The ILO has also launched a number of technical assistance programmes.

What is the purpose of the International Year?

The 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly "to strengthen international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, the environment, development, education and health".

The Year was requested by indigenous organizations and is the result of their efforts to secure their cultural integrity and status into the twenty-first century. It aims above all to encourage a new relationship between States and indigenous peoples, and between the international community and indigenous peoples—a new partnership based on mutual respect and understanding.

To assist with the Year's programmes and activities, and to foster educational and cultural events, the Secretary-General of the United Nations opened the Voluntary Fund for the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, to which Governments are invited to contribute.

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